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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ASUNCION 000208

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TAGS: PGOV PREL KDEM PA

SUBJECT: PARAGUAY: LUGO STILL IN CLERGY; JOINS OPPOSITION PACT

REF: ASUNCION 0161 AND PRECEDING

Classified By: DCM MICHAEL J. FITZPATRICK; Reasons 1.4(b),(d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Bishop Fernando Lugo continues to poll high in the run up to the May 2008 general elections, despite his apparent Constitutional ineligibility. The Apostolic Nuncio in Paraguay maintains that Lugo is a Bishop and forbidden by Canon rules to seek public office. During a March 3 campaign sweep, Lugo predicted he could win the presidency without support of opposition political parties. But he then signed an agreement among opposition parties to field a unified candidate list and platform. Lugo then flipped again signaling he may not honor that agreement and might run for the presidency under his own Tekojoja Movement. Some opposition leaders are beginning to express doubts about the Monsignor's candidacy on Constitutional - if not political - grounds and hope the Colorado Party challenges the eligibility of Lugo. END SUMMARY.

POLLING HIGH; NOT BRINGING OUT THE MASSES

¶2. (U) Despite the Constitutional bar on religious ministers serving in political office, Bishop Fernando Lugo remains the clear front runner for the May 2008 Presidential elections, according to press polls (and, since this is Paraguay, the number 2 and 3 presidential contenders also appear to be barred from running: President Nicanor Duarte Frutos and jailed coup-plotter General Lino Oviedo). Lugo has crisscrossed the country feverishly campaigning and criticizing the current administration. However, in recent campaign stops he has failed to bring out crowds larger than 60 to 100 persons. While this may be expected in small towns and villages, some have begun to speculate if Lugo has enough support to win the election.

HE IS A CLERGYMAN

¶3. (C) Father Santiago Dewitt Guzman, from the Apostolic Nuncio in Paraguay, told PolOff March 14 that Lugo is "suspended" but remains a member of the clergy pursuant to the February 1 Holy See letter (signed by Cardinal Giovanni Battista Re, Prefect of the Congregation of Bishops). DeWitt expects the Holy See will reiterate its stance to Lugo but will not grant him his wish of Laicization (the Vatican never considers this an option for Bishops, according to DeWitt).

¶4. (C) DeWitt believes Lugo is not a truthful person and has been "fooling" the Church and the people for many years. He says Lugo will do or say anything for his personal goals. DeWitt notes that the Vatican will not engage in the civil issues related to Lugo's bid for office because they think that is the Paraguayan government's business.

THE PACT

¶ 15. (U) Lugo finally signed the opposition's National Coalition Pact March 5, a month after its February 5 creation, but hinted that he may not honor the agreement and seek to run for the presidency under his Tekojoja Movement. (NOTE: The National Coalition is an agreement between the opposition parties and "citizen Lugo" to field a unified candidate list and platform for the general election. The Tekojoja Movement has refused to sign the National Coalition Pact. END NOTE).

¶ 16. (U) Some opposition leaders have privately shared doubts about the eligibility of Lugo and are pressing on with intra-party elections, in case the Lugo candidacy fails to come to fruition. Senator Arsenio Ocampos Velazquez, of the Beloved Fatherland Party (PPQ), noted that PPQ leader Pedro Fadul is doubtful Lugo can clear the Constitutional hurdle. But, few opposition leaders are prepared to challenge what they still see as the Lugo juggernaut and would prefer the Colorado Party do the "dirty work" and challenge the Lugo candidacy.

THE ADMINISTRATION VIEW

¶ 17. (C) For its part, the Colorado-lead government remains focused and concerned about Lugo. FM Ruben Ramirez Lezcano told Ambassador March 14 that the government "knows for a fact" that Venezuela is funneling funds to Lugo for his campaign.

¶ 18. (C) COMMENT: Lugo continues to rake in the headlines but

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his early out of the gate candidacy may be loosing steam. He is no longer drawing huge crowds and his constant flip-flopping is beginning to irritate some in the opposition ranks. The Tekojoja Movement and other groups are planning the annual March 29 protest, which last year garnered more than 40,000 persons (and launched Lugo onto the national scene last year). If Lugo is not able to match or exceed those numbers, he could be in trouble. The opposition parties were a big part of that event and their participation is key. The National Coalition remains unified - for now - but will need to identify a mechanism to choose a unified candidate list. Lugo is expecting to be "ascended" to the top of the list via an agreement among political party leaders. Many within the parties - especially those still backing other opposition leaders - are seeking party elections to determine the Coalition list. The question of his Constitutional eligibility remains unresolved by the government but the Catholic Church is very clear that Lugo is a clergymen and maintains their view that he is forbidden to seek public office. END COMMENT.

CASON